

The Service of Tenebrae

April 14, 2017

The Shadow of Betrayal

The Scripture Reading Matthew 26:47-50

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. (Pause)

The Meditation

What was it that caused Judas to betray the one he had followed for almost three years? Why was Jesus betrayed by goodness into the hands of evil? One thing is certain: Judas performed his cruel act for more than just thirty pieces of silver.

Perhaps Judas thought largely of himself. He had visualized himself in a position of great importance in the coming kingdom, and he felt his fond ambitions were being dashed to pieces by the delay of Jesus. Thus, he tried to force the hand of Jesus into setting up his kingdom immediately. When he thought of this new kingdom, Judas saw it from his own viewpoint and did not endeavor to discover the details of Jesus' view. The differences in the type of kingdom to be established gradually created a gulf between Judas and his Lord. His zeal for moving into a kingdom on earth was so great that his zeal became misplaced when he entered into the deal with the enemies of Jesus.

Judas failed to anticipate the outcome of his deed before he did it. When he kissed the Master it had far-reaching effects. It was the signal that began the events that led to his death. Through this act, he actually sold his Lord into the hands of his enemies. But, he did more than that; he also sold himself and bought his own destruction.

The clouds over the Garden of Gethsemane now began to change in the moonlight; as they did so, they cast a cruel shadow around the Son of God and his followers.

Judas had conflicted feelings about Jesus, feelings that later in the day would lead him to suicide.

Have you betrayed the Christ with your own action or non action?

On Sunday we come to church to worship. Are we living in a way that honors Christ for the rest of the week?

Perhaps you have been an active witness to him through your church, but now you are beginning to have doubts concerning the mission and purpose of the Church. Will you continue to be faithful, or will you betray him as you let the spark of his spirit burn out without you? (Pause)

Let us pray:

Lord, sometimes we find ourselves conflicted within. We attend worship service on Sunday but we do not even think about you during the week. Or we find ourselves struggling with the desires

of this world or seeking the affirmation and praise of others, and through our words and deeds we have betrayed you. Forgive us, we pray. Help us to live as Christ's disciples every day. Amen.

(The first candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Denial

The Scripture Reading

Luke 22:54-62

⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly. (Pause)

The Meditation

Peter was certain that Jesus would be able to overcome the evil forces that were opposing him. He had listened to him declare what lay ahead, but responded with, "No, no; that cannot be!" Jesus had unlimited power and Peter felt he would use it against his enemies. He really couldn't bring himself around to believing that death was near at hand.

The other disciples looked to Peter as the example of loyalty and devotion. He had been so near to Jesus in so many experiences, and he had declared that he was the long-promised Messiah. Now, suddenly, he was thrust into an unforeseen situation. Before he realized what was happening, he had uttered words of denial - not once, but three times. When he heard the cock crow, the words of Jesus came back to him and he realized what he had done. The one who had been a symbol of strength and loyalty to his Lord had, in a few short hours, become a symbol of failure and denial.

There are at least three things to note in the story of Peter's denial. First, Peter could have left the courtyard after the servant girl accused him of being a follower of Jesus. While it is true that he denied Jesus, he did not leave the courtyard because he still loved Jesus.

Second, we should note the way Peter's denial affected him. He was deeply grieved by what he had done, and he wept bitterly.

Third, this story is told in all four Gospels despite the fact that it would have been deeply embarrassing to Peter, the prince of the apostles. Why did all four Gospel writers tell the story? It is probably because Peter had told it again and again across the Roman Empire. Telling the story could have been his way of saying; "I denied knowing the Lord, but after his resurrection he took me back and restored me; and by his grace I am what I am today!"

This is a story of fear and denial. But it is also a story of grace and restoration. If the Lord could restore Peter, surely he can do it for us, despite the many ways we have denied him by our words and actions.

Who comes first in our life? Christ and his kingdom or something else? Are we willing to take a stand in support of Christ's mission, what he stood for -- peace, love and justice? Will we support Jesus Christ with our loyalty and devotion, or will we deny him when the time of testing comes?

The dawn had begun, with the soft rays of the early morning sun projecting a glimmer of light, but Peter seemed to be surrounded by darkness - the darkness of the forthcoming cross of his Master. (Pause)

Let us pray:

O God, we have failed You in the past when You really needed a strong witness for your cause. Forgive us for being lukewarm in our faith. Guide us, and give us courage to stand up for your mission in the world. Through Jesus, who did not turn around but marched towards his cross for us. Amen.

(The second candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Rejection

The Scripture Reading

Mark 15:6-14

⁶Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief

priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³They shouted back, “Crucify him!” ¹⁴Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” (Pause)

The Meditation

What kind of crowd was it that asked for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus? What did they have against this teacher from Galilee? The people had been with him in large numbers earlier in the week - coming from Bethany, entering the city, going up to the Temple - but their reaction was now suddenly hostile. They had hailed him as their leader, and had listened to his teaching; how could they suddenly turn against him and request his death?

Probably there were two groups of people in the crowd outside Pilate’s chamber. There were those who had been emotionally stirred up, such as the money changers and the merchants at the Temple whose tables Jesus turned over and those, perhaps, had been bribed by some of the priests and elders; probably these were the ones who shouted, “Crucify him!” There were probably few, if any, of his followers in this group. But there was also a second group; this was the multitude who stood by and did nothing. Even though many of them probably did not know what was actually happening or knew that Jesus didn’t deserve to be crucified, they went along with those who yelled the loudest. There were many followers in this group, but by their silence they allowed Pilate to make his decision.

While we would condemn those who wanted Jesus crucified, we know there were many who failed to have the courage to stand up for what they believed to be right. Public opinion is very important to those in positions of political power. Christians have an obligation to stand up for what is just and honest, especially where the rights of other people are involved.

Many of the people of the crowd became lost in the shadows of evil and trickery that morning. Before they realized it, they were “swallowed up” by the darkness of fear(pause) and indifference (pause) and uttered not a word to support their Lord.

Do we join the crowd in shouting, “Crucify him,” as we fail to take a stand for good in the face of evil? Do we crucify him anew as we see injustice around us and do nothing about it? Are we willing to stand up for our Christian convictions and beliefs, even if it means standing alone and going against the majority? (Pause)

Let us pray:

Forgive us for our silence and our apathy, Christ Jesus, and for failing to take a strong stand for You and your Church. Give us the courage we need to make an unfaltering testimony for You and what you stood up for; help us witness to You and your truth by our words and our actions; in your name we pray. Amen.

(The third candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Injustice

The Scripture Reading Matthew 27:24-26

²⁴So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” ²⁵Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” ²⁶So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Pause)

The Meditation

Pilate tried in every way to delay making a decision concerning Jesus. He sent him to Herod in the hope that he would take this problem off his hands. Pilate could not find Jesus in violation of any law, and believed that he was innocent of the charges that had been placed against him. However, he also realized the pressure of popular opinion; the people had to be satisfied with him as governor, or they would complain to Rome. He knew that he should release him, but he was afraid of what the consequences might be.

Pilate decided to play politics with the life of Jesus. He didn’t want to feel any personal guilt from this decision, so he conceived the idea of letting the people decide. Perhaps he thought they would ask him to release Jesus, but he was mistaken. He failed to realize how the crowd had been stirred up by the priests and elders. He made the decision to follow the whims of the people - an act that was decisive and final. As soon as he had made it, he knew within his own mind that he had made the wrong one.

Pilate had the authority and power to set Jesus free but refused to exercise it. Instead, he “wished to satisfy the crowd,” (pause) and save his neck, and he sent Jesus to be crucified. Now Pilate is remembered throughout history as a political ruler who knew what was right but didn’t act on it (pause) since he was more concerned about saving his own reputation and gain.

Are we aware of political leaders today who are less concerned about ethical standards and justice than they are about being accepted by people and becoming re-elected? Do we support leaders who can reduce our taxes, even though the means may be questionable, or do we give our loyalty to those who stand for equality and justice?

Furthermore, let us ask to ourselves.

Do we sometime act like Pilate, a people pleaser? (pause)

Can we find Pilate in us? (pause)

How easy it is to betray Christ and to please the crowd? (pause) When have we said or done things aimed at satisfying “the crowd”? When have we remained silent when we should have spoken out? (Pause)

Let us pray:

Lord, you know every time we have had a crisis of courage. You know when we have been silent and when we should have spoken out. Forgive us; and teach us boldness, courage and love. Amen.

(The fourth candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Torture

The Scripture Reading

Mark 15:16-20

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters; and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. (Pause)

The Meditation

There are many different dimensions to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. One of them is that in Jesus' suffering and death, God was fully identifying with us and was able to experience what we go through as human beings. God knows what it means to feel small, to be attacked mentally and emotionally, and to be physically abused.

Jesus was humiliated at the hands of the Roman soldiers. He was taken before the entire cohort - some three hundred to six hundred soldiers - who stripped him naked, mocked him, crowned him with thorns, struck him, and spat upon him. He stood there naked, accepting the meanness, the hate, the cruelty. We can envision his strength, staring at his tormentors with determination and perhaps even a glint of pity. He took their spittle, their blows, and their taunts.

Do you know someone who was picked on or was humiliated by others as you were growing up or still now? Not knowing what you were doing or because you were afraid to be said as a coward or not being one of them, you may have participated in tormenting others. Or you may have been the one who was tormented or humiliated by cruel words and actions of others.

It is not only Roman soldiers who know how to be cruel and inhumane.

For every child who was ever picked on, taunted, and humiliated, Jesus stood there that day. For every man and woman who was ever made to feel small by others, he stood there that day. For every victim of torture, everyone falsely condemned, everyone who has been abused by another, he stood there as if God were saying, "I subjected myself to the hate and meanness of others so that I could identify with you." (Pause)

Let us pray:

Lord, our hearts ache as we imagine you standing among the soldiers as they hurled insults and spat upon you. Thank you for enduring shame so that you might know the pain we sometimes experience. Thank you for identifying with our hurts and pain. Forgive us for those times when we have been on the giving end of this hurt, when by our words and actions we made others feel humiliated and small. Amen.

(The fifth candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Mockery

The Scripture Reading

Luke 23:39-43

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Pause)

The Meditation

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. There was something strangely fitting in this, for Jesus had spent most of his public ministry trying to reach people just such as these. As he once had told the Pharisees, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10) He had said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." (Mark 2:17) Even as he hung on the cross, Jesus showed the kind of compassion and concern for lost people that he had demonstrated throughout his ministry.

But thieves initially joined the crowd and the religious leaders in mocking Jesus as he hung between them. But one of the men had a change of heart as he listened to Jesus' words from the cross. This thief spoke to Jesus, saying, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42) Was the man simply offering kind words to Jesus; or did he truly understand that Jesus, by his death, was ushering in his kingdom? In either case, at that moment Jesus promised the man that he would join Jesus in paradise.

This criminal knew virtually nothing about Jesus' teachings. He had not been baptized. Yet Jesus offered him paradise, based solely on the man's desire to be with Jesus in his eternal kingdom. What does this teach us about the grace of the Lord? (pause)

The word *paradise* originally signified a park or orchard. The Bible begins and ends in paradise. It begins with Eden, God's orchard. And it ends in Revelation 22 with a description of the heavenly kingdom - a picture of paradise. It was paradise that Jesus offered the thief on the cross.

Many people who have had near death experiences and saw the glimpse of heaven say that it is a wonderful place to enter. Some say they were welcomed by their loved ones who went before them. Others say the place itself is beautiful with flowers and plants. Still others have heard heavenly music. Whatever the paradise may be, Jesus gave this criminal a promise that he would be with him in paradise. (Pause)

Let us pray;

Christ Jesus, we want to be with you in your kingdom. Please ready our hearts, (pause) that when this life is over, we might be with you in paradise. Amen.

(The sixth candle is extinguished.)

The Shadow of Disbelief

The Scripture Reading Matthew 27:39 - 49, Luke 23:46

³⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” ⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ⁴²“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. ⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” ⁴⁴The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”

⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

The Meditation

The religious leaders of Jerusalem were jealous of the power that Jesus possessed. They could not perform miracles and some of the people were beginning to doubt their authority. While many were not serious followers of Jesus, their number was large enough to cause great concern on the part of the scribes and priests.

Perhaps these leaders really wanted Jesus to come down from the cross and perform another miracle. However, it is doubtful whether they would have followed him even if he had done this. He had already done enough miracles, and answered sufficient questions, for them to have become followers if they wanted to do so. They really wanted to mock him, and in so doing hoped to belittle him before the crowd.

These leaders were shocked by the response of Jesus, which was complete silence. If they had expected a miracle, they should have realized that during his ministry he had only used miracles to help others, and not merely to demonstrate his power. If they had expected a verbal answer to

their words, they were disappointed. The silence that followed seemed to indicate more than any words could have said. He well knew that his kingdom had to be built upon those who would follow him, not because of miracles or argumentation, but because of their faith in him as the very Son of God.

The shadows hung heavy over Golgotha, as dark clouds moved in from all directions. It was during the period of darkness, as Jesus' suffering on the cross drew to an end, Jesus spoke the words of Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22 is a "lament" psalm - one of many in which the psalmists expressed their feelings of disappointment or abandonment by God. The very fact that these psalms exist makes clear that even the most faithful people have moments when they feel forsaken by God. There are times when our life experience seems to negate, or at least to call into question, the goodness of God and even the existence of God.

Does it help you to know that the Jesus we pray to in difficult times once cried out in disappointment, feeling forsaken by God? Do you think God had actually abandoned him? (pause) Psalm 22 and Jesus' prayer from the cross were actually words of faith. In the face of despair, both the psalmist and Jesus **appealed** to God. When one is surrounded by suffering and pain, even a cry of disappointment to God is an act of faith. It is this faith that we see in the last words of Jesus. Jesus uttered the prayer in which he entrusted his life to God: "Into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46a)

The three crosses were completely surrounded by darkness, but through it all something great was happening. The religious leaders, the soldiers and the mockers were spiritually blinded by the shadows around the cross. However, the followers who remained were privileged to be eye-witnesses to the power of God's love for all humanity. (Pause)

Have we allowed ourselves to be spiritually blinded to what the power of God can do for us? Do we live and act in the spirit of Christ, which is trust in God, or in the spirit of the scribes and priests, which is mockery and disbelief? Have we permitted the shadows of disbelief to close our eyes and cover our ears to Jesus Christ and to his message of love and salvation? (Pause)

(The seventh candle is extinguished.)

The Hymn of Shadows "Were You There" solo by Mark Barton

Silent Prayer

Let us pray:

Lord, forgive us when we have permitted various shadows that surrounded the cross of Jesus to keep us from seeing your presence in our lives. Help us to call upon you in our hour of need. It comforts us to know that you understand what it is like to feel abandoned by God. Help us, in our moments of despair, to place our lives in your hands. Amen.

The Shadow of the Tomb

The Scripture Reading

Luke 23:50-56

⁵⁰Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵²This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

The Brief Meditation

We have just witnessed the way in which shadows came toward the cross of Jesus from every direction. We have visualized how these shadows accumulated and produced the blackest clouds that ever darkened the world. But we know that through Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross we have received pardon and forgiveness for all our transgressions. Let this service be a sacred reminder of the gift of God's love for all of us.

Let us also remember that death was not the end. Even though they laid his body in a tomb, it could not contain him. We rejoice in the fact that, through his death upon the cross, Jesus became the Christ, the Savior of human kind, and revealed himself completely as the Son of God. After three days he defied death, he repelled darkness, and turned tragedy into triumph. He emerged from the shadows of the tomb to become the light of the world!